Conclusions



The evidence of historical continuities in the style of Russian and Soviet warfare on the southern, predominantly Muslim periphery of the old Russian Empire and, subsequently, the USSR, probably says as much about the rough congruence of conditions involved in the successive wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan as it does about recurring patterns of Russian military behavior. Obvious circumstantial parallels can be found in cultural factors, particularly religion, and geographical influences.

Although, for example, the intensity of religious reaction to the Russians ranged from Shamil's holy war to the less-fervent tribal war waged by the Basmachis, the Russians, in each instance, confronted peoples whose political and social development, culture, and world view reflected far more similarities than differences. Furthermore, each encounter reflected a collision of cultures where the antagonists peered at one another across a gaping divide carved by many centuries of separate and divergent development. Thus, each Muslim society, whether intruded upon by imperial Russian or Soviet forces, was readily galvanized by the alien presence. The mobilization of resistance, however, did not necessarily bring about unity among the resisters, and the fractious nature of tribal politics prevented the creation of strong and durable alliances. Indeed, even the short-lived Muslim polity forged by Shamil in the Caucasus was eventually torn asunder, in part, by internal strife.

In addition to general similarities in the cultural setting, the geographical backdrop for each war also presented some fundamental parallels. The Caucasus mountains, like the most rugged areas of northern and eastern Afghanistan, posed distinct strategic and tactical problems for the Russians and Soviets. In particular, they restricted maneuver and increased the difficulties in sustaining regular, European-style forces. In the same manner, the vast steppes and desert tracts of Central Asia demanded the careful articulation of strategic and tactical priorities and their consequent implementation, such as the securing of positions from which to control river and land traffic or, above all, the obtaining of sources of drinking water. Nature, it may be said, constituted the predominant factor in Central Asian defenses. In fact, the difficulty of movement by any but small armed groups had so insulated the tribes of Central Asia from external armed predators,

and even from one another, that it probably impeded their military and political development. Thus, in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, the Imperial Army, the Red Army, and the later, more technologically advanced, Soviet Army discovered that nature, in substantial measure, dictated the terms of battle.

Within the context described above, many similarities emerge—in varying degrees to be sure-between Russian conduct of past wars and that in Afghanistan. In all four cases considered in this study, the Russians committed initial errors in their military and political assessments of their adversary. Such were quite understandable during the imperial period given the Russians' limited knowledge of the peoples and lands with which they were coming into contact. The sluggish response to local conditions in the Caucasus, where a fundamental adaptation to the prevailing conditions of warfare occurred only after decades of Russian futility, can only be explained by command inertia and institutional rigidity. There, and in the Central Asian campaigns to follow, military adjustments depended inordinately on the diagnostic talents and influence of a few key personalities, such as Bariatinskii, Miliutin, Skobelev, and Kaufman. Consequently, although there can be no doubt that the Russian Army was capable of correcting its errors. it nevertheless failed to preserve its acquired knowledge from conflict to conflict. Its collective wisdom was never codified in the form of tactical regulations for unconventional warfare. As Russian participants in the unconventional wars passed from the scene, so, too, did the lessons of their experience. Aside from a handful of ponderous histories, and articles in old issues of the official military journal, Voennyi sbornik, little but undigested documentary collections remained to inform future generations of soldiers.

The Red Army's experience in Central Asia while Russia was in the midst of a civil war and in the act of self-creation hardly merits a harsh appraisal for its early shortcomings. Later, the speed with which leaders like Frunze revised the political approach to the war in Central Asia and Red Army analysts came to grips with tactical problems ignored for half a century was remarkable. On the other hand, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was predicated upon the mistaken assumption that the country could be ruled from Kabul and that modern military might would cow any opposition. That such an abysmal misconception of Afghan conditions should prevail after over twenty years of direct Soviet involvement in that country's affairs reflects little credit on Leonid Brezhnev's regime.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, the decisive campaigns of imperial Russian forces depended upon a preparatory phase based on systematic consolidation of vital traffic arteries and strategic points. Once the Russians were in a position to sustain their forces—and understood the importance of method in their approach to conquest—their power was all but irresistible. Likewise, the Red Army seized the strategic initiative early in its struggle with the Basmachis. A logical question follows: why, then, did Soviet control of cities and roads yield such meager gains in Afghanistan? The answer lies, in part, in the ferocity of the Afghan resistance and the Soviet decision to limit its commitment of forces. In all probability, at the time of their

initial intervention in 1979, the Soviets intended only to stabilize their client regime and to restore order. Inadequate Soviet political analysis and enormous infusions of foreign aid to the resistance, however, led to Soviet failure.

When the Soviets found that their initial strategic assessment of Afghanistan was incorrect, they also discovered that their conventional tactics in the field in Afghanistan were more appropriate for a war in Europe. But the Soviet Army in Afghanistan gradually relied less on motorized infantry forces in favor of specially trained heliborne units. Descriptions of large, conventional sweeps by Soviet and DRA forces bear an astonishing likeness to those of imperial offensives in the Caucasus, where main columns became overextended along narrow trails; advance and rear guards, as well as supply trains, were cut off; and lines of communication were subjected to frequent interdiction. The Caucasian mountaineers, like the Afghan Mujahideen, gave battle only on their own terms, choosing to yield before superior forces—but always exacting a stiff price for each enemy advance.

Another characteristic common to each of the four cases considered in this study is the Russians' and Soviets' blending of military and nonmilitary elements in their applications of power: the old fashioned "carrot-and-stick" approach. For example, Shamil's alliance and the Basmachis' resistance both succumbed to a mixture of inducement and force, the former consisting of political and administrative measures calculated to temper the most provocative aspects of Russian rule and the latter relating to the progressive destruction of the economy, villages, and crops upon which the resistance subsisted. Even during the imperial conquest of Central Asia, the Russians made flexible use of diplomacy, local administration, and commercial inducements to head off outbursts of native anger.

Frunze also showed great flexibility in undermining support for the Basmachis. Drawing on this tradition, Soviet analyst and Deputy Chief of the General Staff M. A. Gareev (in a veiled commentary on Afghanistan in 1987), fully embraced Frunze's emphasis on "specific situational conditions." Accordingly, Soviet practice in Afghanistan reflected increasing awareness of the importance of manipulating local conditions as the war progressed. For example, the Soviets induced their client regime to adopt a tolerant policy toward Islam and also to change the name of the state from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to the Republic of Afghanistan. The Soviets also influenced the Afghan regime to undertake economic and social reform to mitigate the negative effects of ruthless socialist policies implemented during the preceding decade. At the same time, of course, Soviet and DRA forces wrought tremendous destruction on insubordinate tribes and regions.

Particularly in Afghanistan and the Caucasus, and to a lesser extent in Central Asia, population control—at least as related to the separation of submissive and unsubmissive elements—was a central Russian objective of coercion. Thus, forced relocation of a substantial portion of the populace was essential for victory in the Caucasus and Afghanistan. The simple aim of forcible relocation whether by capture and removal or through terror

bombing was to deny the resistance any benefits local populations might provide, especially recruits and means of subsistence. Co-opted populations, in turn, could form the human infrastructure for a new social and political order, whether as soldiers, officials, or farmers.

Both the Russians and Soviets drew significant military manpower from the native populations or from ethnically and linguistically related tribal groups that had been assimilated during previous conquests—a fact of symbolic as well as practical importance. In the Caucasus, some local tribes, including Muslims as well as Christian Georgians, contributed forces to the Russian cause. During the conquest of Central Asia, large numbers of Kazakhs and even Turkomans served as camel drivers, scouts, and laborers. The Red Army went even further in Central Asia during the 1920s and formed national military units—although with mixed success. In turn, the early employment by the Soviets of large numbers of Soviet Tajik and Uzbek reservists in Afghanistan, though in part the simple result of their proximity to the theater, was no doubt calculated to make a positive impression on the Afghans. As fellow Central Asians, they would seem a less alien presence among the Afghans than would Russian troops. Unfortunately, the Soviet reservists may have identified too closely with the Afghans, and their reliability was subsequently called into question. Even native Afghan units in the DRA Army proved as impermanent as sand castles at high tide—their ranks dissolving in waves of defections. Though that army survived and even included some battleworthy units by the date of the Soviet withdrawal, its resilience in the absence of active Soviet support remained suspect.

All parallels notwithstanding, some circumstances in Afghanistan differed markedly from those of the past. For primarily political reasons, the Soviet forces in Afghanistan never enjoyed the advantage of strategic envelopment, used to such good effect in prior cases. The annexation of Georgia in 1801 placed Russian forces on both the southern and northern flanks of the Caucasian mountaineers. Similarly, Russia engulfed Central Asia in a series of encirclements. A great pincer movement with one prong advancing along the Syr River in the west and the other slicing southward from Siberia in the east swallowed the Kazakh steppe and the khanate of Kokand during the 1850s and 1860s. An offensive on four converging axes brought the submission of Khiva in 1873. Henceforth, Russian control of the Caspian Sea and the sealing off of the southern frontier with Persia by diplomatic means left the Turkomans in virtual encirclement. With the outbreak of the Basmachi resistance after the October Revolution, most cities and major lines of communications throughout Central Asia were already under Russian control. Although many Central Asians fled across the Afghan border, which remained porous, only briefly did the Basmachis wrest large portions of the region from Soviet control. In contrast, the Soviet march into Afghanistan came from the north, and following the seizure of Kabul, the Soviet Army sought to extend control from the center outward toward the periphery of that nation.

The availability of Pakistan and Iran as sanctuaries, both for the Mujahideen and their families, made it impossible for the Soviets to corner

and liquidate the resistance. With their kin safely beyond the frontier, the guerrillas could seldom be forced to defend their homes, nor would their movement in the country be encumbered by spouses, children, and possessions. Further, the inability of the Soviets to seal the frontiers meant that the Mujahideen enjoyed sustained foreign support and were free to fight or withdraw as circumstances dictated. Short of a vastly greater commitment of military force, these conditions, which had no precedent in past wars, doomed the Soviet Union to a stalemate in Afghanistan.

Two other political factors, not present in previous cases, influenced events as well. First, unlike the Russian public of bygone years, which stoically bore past burdens, many Soviet citizens came to doubt the purpose of years of fighting in Afghanistan. Although no organized opposition to the war ever surfaced, dampened enthusiasm—as manifested in the attempts of many Soviet parents to keep their sons from serving in the Army—no doubt made the decision to extricate Soviet soldiers from their predicament a popular one. More important, the reform movement led by Mikhail Gorbachev marked the most dramatic peaceful turn in political direction since Peter I. Cognizant of the costs, international and domestic, of indefinite pursuit of a futile war, Gorbachev had every reason to seek a political accommodation that would enable him to focus his resources more fully on a new agenda at home.

Shortly after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan began, some Western observers attempted to draw analogies between the Soviet experience and that of the United States in Vietnam. In fact, the truth or falsehood of such comparisons is less important than the light such debates can shed on the complexity and confusion attending the involvement of modern military powers in the affairs of Third World states. Furthermore, important questions emerge concerning the definition of victory and defeat in such interventions—and even whether such terms are strictly relevant in some contexts.

Many of the specific circumstances in Vietnam and Afghanistan are hardly comparable. Vietnam was formally a divided state, whereas Afghanistan was not. Nevertheless, the Communist opposition to the Republic of Vietnam—which operated in the south but to an appreciable degree was sustained from the north—was far more unified in its political goals than the Afghan resistance, which could agree on little more than a common desire to force a Soviet withdrawal. In Vietnam, Communist bloc states supported a war against an American client regime, whereas in Afghanistan, Western and Islamic states helped sustain opposition to a Soviet-sponsored regime. But even those who compare the Soviet and American experiences acknowledge such obvious differences. Rather, it is more in their general contours that the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan bear a striking, though perhaps facile, likeness.

One American analyst of the Vietnam War, Harry Summers, observes that both the Americans and the Soviets failed to discern the enemy's "center of gravity"—its true source of strength, deprived of which it could

not continue.² Obviously, given their limited economic development, possession of foreign sanctuaries, and massive materiel support from outside, both the Vietnamese Communists and the Afghan Mujahideen were not dependent on a domestic military-industrial infrastructure. Furthermore, no single city or position on a map assumed great significance to either resistance movement. Therefore, the Mujahideen were not intimidated by Soviet occupation of their capital city, and it is by no means certain that the loss of Hanoi would have been fatal to the North Vietnamese (who themselves had been guerrillas without a capital within recent memory). In addition, to the extent that each waged a guerrilla war, they did not offer their forces in large formations to be destroyed at the hands of a superior power. Their true "center of gravity" lay as much in their conception of the struggle as in any strategic objective. Each resistance movement was nourished by a powerful mix of motivational factors, be they religion, nationalism, xenophobia, ideology, or ethnicity. Thus, each war was in a fundamental sense political and psychological, grounded in specific factors of history and culture.

The question of a strategic "center of gravity" or point of crucial vulnerability is better raised with regard to the American and Soviet positions. Both the United States and the Soviet Union probably possessed the military means to destroy their opponent—if they were willing to pay a high enough price. Neither, however, realistically estimated that price before committing itself. Nor did either comprehend fully the inherent weakness and instability of the regime it sought to preserve and the absolutely essential role that regime must play in the achievement of a political victory. Only a strong client regime would in time become self-sufficient and cease to rely on the outside power. The failure of the Republic of Vietnam to command the loyalty of a solid majority, or even a cohesive plurality, of the population vitiated its efforts on the battlefield. Similarly, a lack of popular legitimacy plagued the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, and even as they began their withdrawal, the Soviets were not sanguine about its future. Yet in the absence of Soviet forces, the Kabul regime gained an opportunity—however fleeting—to establish its own credibility and, perhaps, reach a modus vivendi with at least some of the resistance factions.

Ultimately, the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan not because they were unable to meet the price of victory, but because the prize seemed less and less worth the expenditure. The inescapable irony of Afghanistan is that the presence of Soviet forces gave the opposition a cohesion it could never have achieved on its own. Meanwhile, the Soviet-backed regime made minimal progress either in building its legitimacy or intimidating its enemies. Thus, in Afghanistan, the Soviets were willing to settle for less than their predecessors obtained in the other cases considered in this study. In some instances, however, less may be more. Ethnic unrest in the Caucasus and Central Asia, not to mention the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, suggests that, whatever their lasting strategic value, the bill for those conquests has not yet been paid in full. Inasmuch as the struggle in Afghanistan not

only failed to further Soviet policy objectives but impeded progress in many specific foreign and domestic policies, it was best abandoned.

Notes



Chapter 5

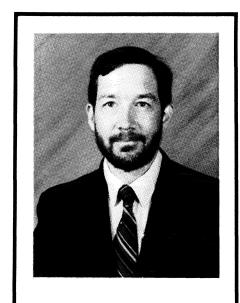
- 1. Colonel General Makhmut Akhmetovich Gareev, M. V. Frunze, Military Theorist, a translation (Washington, DC: Permagon-Brassey's, 1988), 131.
- 2. Harry Summers, "Soviets Are Caught in a Quagmire," from the Los Angeles Times Syndicate in *The Kansas City Star*, 24 April 1988.

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SYNOPSIS OF LEAVENWORTH PAPER 20

The Soviet Union's agonizing decade-long struggle against a fiercely determined Mujahideen resistance in Afghanistan offers a compelling illustration of the perils which can await a modern power that commits conventional forces against an unconventional foe in an undeveloped theater. That the Soviets embarked on such a rash course in 1979 is especially striking in light of the American experience in Vietnam just a few years earlier and Russia's long historical involvement fighting Muslim tribesmen in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Imperial Russia attempted to impose its authority on the Caucasus only to become embroiled in a protracted and brutal war against the mountain tribes of Dagestan. A charismatic leader, Shamil, emerged to harness the power of a formidable resistance that nearly foiled the Russian plan of conquest, which was fulfilled only after decades of destructive and costly campaigning.

Following the collapse of opposition in Dagestan in 1859, the Russians concentrated on the conquest of Central Asia as far as the Afghan and Persian frontiers. Here, vast steppes and deserts-formidable obstacles standing between Russia and the remote khanates-eventually yielded to the determination and methodical preparation of key Russian commanders. Established by a series of major campaigns from the 1850s to the 1880s, Russian rule in Central Asia remained stable until the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917. With the collapse of imperial power, however, the empire dissolved. Efforts to impose Red rule over the former imperial possessions in Central Asia sparked popular resistance among the Muslim tribes and required massive intervention by the Red Army.

The four episodes considered in this study provide useful perspectives on the nature of unconventional warfare, the adaptability of modern military institutions, the character of cross-cultural conflict, and the dilemmas inherent in the creation and maintenance of an empire.